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# JEWISH FOLK-LORE

In the Middle Ages.

BY  
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## JEWISH FOLK-LORE IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

BY DR. M. GASTER.

When we look back to bygone times and try to picture the life of the Jews within the walls of the Ghetto, we find that it is by no means an easy task. Not only are the walls covered with cobwebs spun by time, but also with a marvellous, fabulous veil, to which love and anger, envy and ignorance have contributed; and the road which leads to this mediæval castle, this ghost-haunted house, is covered with thistle and thorn, thus far making it akin to the castle in the fairy tale of the Sleeping Beauty. Everything there sleeps for centuries, and the palace is hidden under a living wall till the time comes when the true knight appears, and all is once more full of life.

In the same way life behind the walls of the Ghetto lies sleeping till the time of awakening comes. Whenever we glance back at that period of Jewish history we see only the gigantic towers uplifting their heads to the sky above the surrounding buildings, we see only the great masters and teachers in Israel, whose heads shine with the last rays of the sinking sun of science, or of the first glimpse of the new dawn, whilst all beneath them is plunged in night and darkness. From time to time we see further the gleams of the fiery pile through the dark, and we behold the glorious figures of our martyrs. Like their contemporaries, the knights, they also fought against dragons and giants, but of a more real character than those of the knights; for they fought against the dragon, *Superstition*, and against the giant, *Inquisition*, only to succumb, without a hope of victory.

Such is the picture presented to our minds when we attempt to realise the life in the Ghetto. Is this picture true? Was there only darkness, and did not light pour into the tents of Jacob? Did the mothers, the teachers of men, not tell their children legends and stories? Did they not soothe their little ones to sleep with lullabies? Did they not recite nursery rhymes, planting in youthful souls the heroism characteristic of the time? And, speaking generally, did our female ancestors not read anything? And if so, what did they read at a time when no novel or romance, such as we have nowadays, existed?

The science which endeavours to answer these and similar questions is a new one. It finds in the nursery the history of the psychological and poetical life of nations, just as the biologist finds in the physical life of the child, the history of the psychological development of mankind. Legends and fairy tales, customs and myths, lullaby songs and nursery rhymes are the flowers which the student plucks in this field, and winds them into wreaths for the divine Muse of poetry.

But this youngest amongst the sciences is also an exact science. The science of Folk-lore tries to explain in a scientific way the origin, growth and development of popular literature, it discovers the sources from which the popular fancy has drawn its materials and follows out the development and ramifications of every phenomenon throughout the whole circle of mankind. Thanks to this science we now recognize as mere legends matters which were considered as facts for centuries, and on the other hand, many a poetical fiction, a symbolical picture aspersed in the Middle Ages is reinstated in its rights.

We look with other eyes on the heaped up treasures of Jewish aggadah, on the diamonds which oriental fancy made brilliant by a fiery inspiration. Brought under this new light cast on them they glitter and gleam in a thousand colours like the dew in the flower when lighted by the sun.

We value as a poetical story, or picturesque image, legends like the following : "In the time when the Lord remembers His children, and sees them dwelling in sorrow and grief amongst the nations, He sheds two tears, and they drop into the great ocean, and their noise is heard from one end of the world to the other. Hence the *earthquake*." What a wonderful picture to express, the sympathy of heaven and earth with the heartstricken grief of the people !

Or take another : "In the same day when King Solomon married the daughter of Necho, the Egyptian king, the angel Michael descended from heaven and planted a reed in the great ocean ; and there came up loam, and upon that Rome was afterwards built." And further : "On the day when Jeroboam first established the two golden calves to be worshipped by Israel, Romulus and Remus erected their tents." Only ill-will, or prejudiced misunderstanding could not see the historical truth in the symbolical explanation of the relation which exists between the fall of Judah and the rise of Rome. Under the form of an allegory, they said that the power of the Jewish nation is intimately connected with true and unchanged religious belief, and a change in such belief necessarily brings about an unavoidable decline.

In the curious tales of Rabbah bar-bar Channah, we recognise further, now-a-days, Indian sailor and travellers' tales, and in some of them Buddhistic legends, as for instance, the story of the gigantic fish, which destroys sixty towns, and out of whose bones the sixty towns are rebuilt. A similar story Buddha himself tells, relating to his pupils one of his former existences.

Innumerable are the examples on which our feet stumble as we tread through the forest thousands of years old, called Jewish literature, where palms and hyssop, trees and bushes, flowers and thorns are often inextricably intertwined.

On the other hand, we have learned to-day to recognize only as *legends*, the absurd accusations hurled against the Jews during the middle ages : such as the use of blood in their ceremonials, the poisoning of wells, the piercing of the host, so that it bled, even the accusations that the Jews have been usurers to so great an extent as it was presumed. All these, and similar accusations, are the outcome of prejudice, they are cobwebs spun by poisonous spiders, which hide the true light, and render the approach to the Ghetto disgusting and obnoxious. But we sweep them away, we know that they are only floating material to be found everywhere in the air, waiting only for the right time and the right men to appropriate and make use of them. They are for us nothing more than one of those numerous legends, devoid of every internal truth, and interesting only for the student of folk-psychology and folk-lore.

One more legend refers to the seclusion of the Jews within the walls of their houses, who are said to care nothing for the movement of the times, and who let the waves of the rolling sea pass over their shelter. But be the walls as high as towers and the prejudice as powerful as ever, they never form a real barrier against the spirit, which pours in through a thousand invisible channels. "The sun shines for the righteous as well as for the sinner," and the light and bliss of poetry penetrates into every heart accessible to it. The Jews proved their high sense and their keen appreciation of everything that was grand and beautiful, they were always ready to accept with eagerness all the productions of poetical fancy, with the simple restriction that it should not be in contradiction to their



moral and ethical principles. In the same natural unaffected way in which the tales and legends were told, they were also received without being put first in the Procrustes-bed of a religious dogmatism. They did not seek in the gentle flowers of the human soul deep mysteries—this has been reserved for another less poetical and more rigid period—but they enjoyed their sweet smell, the perfume of human paradise, innocence and beauty. Surrounded with legends and tales their heroes appeared to them with a halo, like the heroes of the fairy-tale. The past was adorned by poetical creations, the future was seen in a magical light, and this helped them to forget the sad present, and lifted them above the miseries and vicissitudes of the moment.

In this process of poetical and intellectual activity the Jews were in close relationship with all other nations. It is common to all men to strive after an ideal life and to corporealize it in the hero of their imagination. Therefore also we see in the development of history the continual change of the type of the ideal. It is the real measure of our progress. The ideal of one period is no more that of another. Alexander is the hero in the time of chivalry, Josaphat or St. Anthony of the time of austere monasticism, another ideal is the martyr, and again another the wise philosopher. Round them cluster a world of legends, taken from one character and conferred on another, adding new traits to the cherished figure, in order to make it as perfect as possible; uniting all the abilities which distinguish men into *one* superior personage.

The painter when he paints his picture borrows also the single traits from many individuals amongst whom they are scattered. There is no perfect being to be found in real life, and many have to lend their attributes in forming *one*. So also the popular fancy takes and borrows wherever it comes across anything that is likely to please it, to inspire it, to produce a loud echo in the human heart. It never asks whence it comes and whether it is provided with a passport or means of living before it lands on the shore, but everywhere the hero of one nation, slightly disguised, finds warm and kind hospitality. The human part in the legends or in the story is the real attraction and not the outer form. They are soon deprived of their special national character, and they get the right of citizenship throughout the wide world.

The life and adventures of Alexander, or Rusten, or Ro'and, or of many of King Arthur's and Charlemagne's knights, made in their literary form longer travels, than the hero of them does in his life, and the success obtained by the pen was by far more extensive than the real victories fought and won by the sword. They wandered from country to country, from nation to nation, to charm the reader and to elevate his mind. This is also one of the multifarious results of the new study of Folk-lore. Not only does it reveal to us the sources of enjoyment during centuries, and the inner life of the nations, but it reveals to us unthought of connections and elements of our spiritual development, unknown and unsuspected till to-day.

Strange to say, the life of nature and terrestrial phenomena repeat themselves in a striking manner in the life of nations. That is why we can nearly always borrow a picture from the former, in order to illustrate in a plastic way a fact in the latter. So also in our case. Very well-known is the Gulf-stream, which originates in the tropics, and travels round the earth, carrying with it trees to the icy North pole, thus furnishing the inhabitants of regions of snow and bitter cold with the necessary warmth and light. Through the sea of nations we can also follow nowadays a similar stream coming from the hotbed of Oriental fancy to the dark North, carrying with it what we call the romantic literature, the joy and delight of centuries. There is the well-spring from which almost all the poets of Europe have drawn the waters of "eternal

youth" (the *eau de jouvence*) ; Shakespeare, to begin with, the giant of dramatic poetry, Chaucer, Dante, Tasso, Boccaccio, the founder of the modern novel-literature, Cervantes, Voltaire, Goethe, Victor Hugo, Longfellow, Tennyson, and all such men who have given the highest expression to human sentiments. They all are indebted to Folk-lore, and we find in their works we admire, frequent evidence that theirs is only the form, the polishing of the diamond, whilst the contents, the diamond itself, is the property of the people.

Had the Jews any part in it? Did they also contribute in one way or another to the accumulation of the actual spiritual wealth of Europe?

When eating honey we never ask how many bees have been at work, and out of how many flowers did they gather the elements of the honey? This is the task left to the student to answer.

The student of Folk-lore has also to answer how many bees have been at work to produce the honey of romantic literature? And he answers that amongst all others the Jews have been most prominent and active workers in that field. It is proved today beyond any doubt that they have been the foremost propagators, if not always the originators of the tales, and especially to their mediation is due the spreading of Oriental literature amongst the European nations. They have been the translators and compilers, and not a little of the popular literature of the Middle Ages, including some of the romances of chivalry, are based upon and imbued with Jewish legends and Jewish traditions.

The activity of the Jews was a double one: they originated some legends and accepted others. There has been constant giving and taking, a living interchange between the nations, which did not cease even in times of deep persecution, of depression and sorrow. The Jews have not only coined silver and gold, they coined also the spirit and brought it into wide circulation. No wonder, therefore, that we find in the Jewish literature an ample representation of the universal popular literature, and especially that of the Orient.

As early as the time of the Maccabees we find already traces of the poetical activity of the national genius. Round the Biblical personages the never ceasing popular fancy gathers stories and legends, which grow and develop in the course of centuries, like the river which is small and pure at the beginning, but widens and becomes charged with many elements in its further course. At a given period the Christian and Mahomedan literature is imbued with Jewish Aggadas, as these legends are termed.

The aim is always to explain what seems incongruous or inexplicable in the biography or in the deeds of a venerable personage, and the older it is the more freedom is accorded to the fancy to hold sway over it. This tendency of explanation may be noted as a constant characteristic feature of all legends throughout the world. Only to take an example, among the figures of the Old Testament, none is so favoured by popular fiction as Solomon, the most romantic and wisest of all kings, who occupied the throne of Judah. It would be impossible to enumerate here all the feats attributed to him, all the wise judgments passed by him, and all the adventures which he went through. He is the hero of a whole cycle of legends which travelled round the world. One single episode, that of Solomon's adventure with the king of the genies, Asmodeus, entering into the world's literature, shows us the figure of Solomon disguised in the following impersonations: as Vikramaditya and the Rakshas in India; as Arthur and Merlin in England; as Por and Kitovras in Russia; as Solomon and Markulph again in England, and Germany; as Alboni and Bertoldo in Italy; as Jovinnia or King Robert of Sicily (as better known in the works of Chaucer and Longfellow.)

We can follow the traces of these biblical legends not only in the Jewish Aggadas but also in the Christian literature, where they served as models for lives and legends of saints. The Christian Iconography does also not represent the real, but the legendary life of the biblical personages and of the saints.

To the biblical personages there were added figures taken from the post-biblical times. Foreign legends, especially the Syrian and the Egyptian creep in and are blended together. The pure Rabbinical Aggadas make their appearance, and influence in their turn the neighbouring literature. Some of these are, for instance, incorporated into the famous Arabian Nights, which were originally Indian tales wrapped in Arabic and Persian disguises, and adorned and amplified with Jewish embellishments.

Among the Jews, for centuries earlier than the "Gesta Romanorum" and Centonovelle," arose the first collection of genuine tales, as a book for relief in sorrow. In order to comfort a friend in his sorrow, R. Nassim in Kairuan in North Africa, composed in the 10th century the Maase Ni-sim. And one of the oldest *fairy* tales, in which *fairy land* is for the first time introduced is attributed to no less a personage than the son of the great Maimonides.

In that Aggadic literature we find a "Divine Comedy" or a wandering through Hell and Paradise centuries before Dante; the prototype for the "Merchant of Venice," the "Vigilant Miracles," localised in Naples, and many other similar poetical fictions. The Troubadours in France and the Novellieri in Italy are further specially indebted to the Jews for the "Disciplina Clericalis," composed by a certain Moses in 1104, who after his baptism at the age of 44 years took the name of Petrus Alfonsi, because King Alfonso of Arragonia was his grandfather.

The great event in the history of romantic literature was the introduction of Indian tales, fables and apologues into the heart of Europe. Strange and wonderful is the history of their migration and the rôle played by the Jews in this spiritual exchange. For almost every book or every tale which afterwards had a hold on the minds of the nations, came hither mostly through the mediation of the Jews. In the Orient as well as in Spain, in Byzantium and Italy, the Jews were busy in translating and spreading the Panchatantra, Syndipata, and even the wonderful life of Budha, who became a Christian saint under the name of Josiphath, is known under another name in Jewish literature; and other similar Oriental works of Indian origin.

In this way we could add name to name, collection to collection, all proving the lively interest and the hearty collaboration of Jews in the kingdom of poetry and fiction. Names such as Simeon Seth, Harsisi, Ibn Sahula, Klonymus, Bera-hja Hannakdan, and others show that scattered all over the world, the Jews have been the bearers of good and mirthful tidings in times of sorrow and mirthlessness. The storm which shakes the trees of the forest at the same time carries the seed far off to other countries. The storm which shook the trees of Judah has scattered the seed over all lands.

Less numerous are the romances of chivalry in Jewish literature. When chivalry flourished, the Jews were too much acquainted with the real character of brutality inscribed with fire and blood in the pages of Jewish suffering, to see the charm with which later times endowed that period and the heroes thereof.

An exception makes however the legendary life of Alexander the Great, conqueror of Asia, the hero who bows his knees before the Temple in Jerusalem and travels to the gates of Paradise. This fabulous life exercised a great influence on the Jewish mind. Reminiscences of it are not scarce in the Midrash and Talmud and later his biography became also widely circulated among Jews as it was



among the other nations. But this was a figure of hoar antiquity, and the rudeness of his features—if there were any—has melted away in the distance of time. Not so with the later knights, who lived nearer to their own time. A great interval must elapse before their material life shall be forgotten, so as to appear in an attractive and not repulsive form to the victims of their oppression and persecution. The change took place in the new phase of the Jewish Folk-lore in which we enter now, the folk lore of the Ghetto, when the old Hebrew language was replaced by the vernacular.

The literary life was interrupted by the unceasing blows aimed at the annihilation of the Jews. The garden of poetry was buried under stones, hurled down by hundreds of enemies. It is the time of elegies and lamentations. But the creative power could not be entirely suppressed. The gentle sex could not do without the resources they possessed in former times. They claimed as an inheritance the continuation of the work, and this in a manner more suitable to their changed position. Thus, we behold amongst the Jews, an analogous change to that observed in the literature of all nations. Instead of Latin or Hebrew, preserved only as the language of science and the language of the Church, the vernacular took its place in the literature of fiction. This is the origin of European *popular* literature. So it happened also with all the treasures heaped up during centuries, of which we had but a fleeting glance; they passed on enlarged and enriched, but this time they appear in the new language acquired by the Jews, namely in the peculiar German dialect, as it is known in the present day, and which is falsely called Jargon.

One essential difference between Jewish and other literatures must be pointed out. It is characteristic and shows up under the very light in which it ought to be seen. From the Latin the translations into the vernacular were made for the entire people; the translation from Hebrew into the vernacular was made only for the "women and camels." It was the women's literature of the middle-ages. Every man knew at least the Bible and the prayers, and was always capable of reading a light book in the original. Therefore all the works in Jewish-German address themselves to the fair sex, many of them being made at their special request and we number among the authors not a few women as the famous Litte, the author of a versified translation of a book of the Bible. So you see lady authors are not at all a modern institution, even among the Jewesses!

Out of this literature they drew instruction, enlightenment, and enthusiasm, it kindled in their hearts the fire of love and devotion to their holy religion. This was their *belles-lettres* and romantic literature. In this German-popular language they expressed their hope and grief, their joy and anger; their elegy and hymn. In this they told the fairy tales to the children, and sang the lullaby songs.

One single glance informs us of the unexpected richness of this branch of Jewish literature. No other reflects more clearly all that inner life of the Ghetto which withdraws itself from the scrutinizing eye. We all know that shyness, proper to the internal life, which shrinks from an attempt to see itself unveiled before a strange eye, which might profane it. We fear even the smile or the laugh of the beholder, who is not able to identify himself entirely with our feeling, and attaches no importance to what we cherish most. The value is not always the object itself; but the reminiscences that linger about it endear it to us. Thus it is with the *Cinderella* of Jewish literature, with the ou cast child of the Jewish family.

To speak of the Jewish-German dialect is a daring undertaking; to show the importance it has for the history of Jewish culture in particular, and the history of Folk-lore in general, is no doubt an act of great temerity. And yet there are only

a few prejudices to be removed, and *Cinderella* will occupy the place due to her. A special lecture is announced on the Jewish-German dialect, and this makes it unnecessary for me to enter into any detail upon that subject. Suffice it to say, that modern philology has proved beyond any doubt, that this so much-depicted jargon is a *pure* German dialect, very closely resembling the language of the oldest translations of the Bible—naturally, long before Luther's, and in a different dialect. The peculiarity of Jewish-German dialect is the introduction of Hebrew and Aramaic words which give it somewhat a baroque appearance. But just these new elements are best fitted by their brevity and expressiveness to adapt themselves to all the plies and crevices of the Jewish mind. The popular language is distinguished from the literary by its terse and witty expressions; and the Hebrew words, like the epigrams of the oriental wisdom, joined with the mystic sound of the Aramaic elements add a new force to the Jewish-German dialect. It becomes at the same time pliant and homely, and serves its purposes as the expression of thought in an admirable way. But let it be well understood that I speak only of the past, and the due appreciation of it, but not of the present or future when this dialect has to give place to the language of the people in whose midst we live.

To return to the literature it embraces all that is interesting in a certain degree of human development. We have thus secular and sacred history books of ethics and moral doctrine, prayer books, and books of hymns and songs. They all teach modesty, resignation and pious devotion. The "*Tzeenah-Ureenah*," the translation of the Bible, embellished by narratives, Aggadas and symbolical explanations, was for centuries the household book of every Jewish wife, in which she read, Saturday after Saturday, the portion of the week. The children listened to the words of God, and of the prophets themselves telling of the glories of the past, and of the hopes of the future, elevating them above the misery of the present.

The legends, tales and stories have also a special character. They are full of confidence in God, of His mercy, of His providence, and of His love for His people, shown in innumerable instances. All the supernatural powers developed in other tales root here in God alone, who sends the prophet Elijah to rescue and aid the helpless and unfortunate.

The influence this literature exercised upon the Jewish house in the middle-ages can by no means be valued as a small one. To its influence may be in a measure ascribed the family virtues, such as charity, kindness, beneficence and piety, and also the fact that the light of poetical yearning has never been extinguished in the house of Israel.

To the old legends and tales, new ones were added, increasing the number of heroes. After the Biblical and Talmudical personages, there appeared on the stage of the world new knights of the spirit, who fought the battles of philosophy, poetry, and liberty. The people familiarized themselves with these names in their own way, in the way of legendary description, just as the other nations did with their heroes and *sarants*, and although separated from them by external barriers, they joined them in imagination, borrowing and lending as in former times. The new legends crystallized around the principal figures of Jewish history, explaining what seems dark; glorifying the natural power and skill as well as the knowledge with which they were gifted; extolling the wondrous dexterity with which they mastered their adversaries and escaped the snares of their enemies always helped by the visible or invisible assistance of God and to the benefit of the entire nation. The loftiness and sublimity of conception is mingled with the



pride of numbering such men with the members of their family, and this renders clear to us how entire circles of legends were originated even in times of supposed intellectual sterility and darkness.

I find myself in a position akin to that of the man in the admirable allegory of Börne, *Honestus*. A young man is introduced by a beggar, to his great astonishment, into a treasure house, where every object of marvelous beauty, cries to him: "Take me! take me!" and when he yields to the temptation the beggar suddenly turns out to be a wonderful magician. So am I also led by a disguised beggar—the Jewish jargon—into the treasury of Folk-lore and every legend, every story cries: "Tell me! tell me!" But I fear the power of the magician, and more I fear the power of my audience if I should yield too much to the temptation.

Neither time nor space allows me even to mention them all by name. I select only those tales concerning some of the best known personages of Jewish history, and more with the purpose of exciting your curiosity than to satisfy it. I merely show you the way to Aladdin's wonderful lamp. Touch it, and all the spirits of the past will appear ready to serve you and to carry you back to the life of former centuries.

I begin with the famous Maimonides, whose life even before the time of his birth was embellished with many narratives. Only two of them will now occupy our attention. The first relates to his skill as a doctor; the second is a wonderful escape that he had.

It is told that the Rambam when he lived at the court of the Sultan had a number of students gathered around him, whose teacher he was. He instructed them both in Talmudical and Rabbinical knowledge, and also medical science, because he was the most skilful doctor that ever lived. Amongst his pupils was one who distinguished himself more than all the others, and Rambam took a fancy to him. He, however, had the peculiar custom, whenever a difficult case happened, of shutting his doors so that none could witness his proceedings. The pupil therefore made a hole in the floor of the room above that of the operations and looked through it. Once upon a time there came a man to the Rambam who suffered from great pain in his head. The Rambam took him in his room and opened his skull, when he saw a worm lying upon the brain. He was then just going to remove it by means of pincers, when the young man who watched his master through the hole suddenly exclaimed: "Do not touch him, else thou wilt kill him!" At the sound of this unexpected voice the Rambam started back, and, finding whence it came, bade his pupil to come down. He then asked him what he should do, and the young man advised him to put a cabbage-leaf near to it. He did it, and the worm, attracted by the smell, left its place and crawled upon it, and the man was saved. From this date the Rambam studied all the mysteries of medicine together with this pupil.

Amongst his books he possessed also a medical book written by Solomon, which nobody else possessed. In it were also instructions how to become immortal. The man must be cut to pieces, the parts mixed with various herbs, and put for a given time (say 40 days) under a glass bell, where the body was to be watched with the greatest attention, so that nothing should come near to it or move it, otherwise the body would never again revive. Induced by the wish to try the experiment, they cast lots, and the lot fell upon the young man. The legend adds that the young man was in love with the daughter of Maimonides, who promised to give him her hand if he consented to undergo the experiment. The last word of the dying man was the name of his love. Maimonides prepared everything, as was prescribed, and awaited with curiosity the result of this frightful experiment.

After a short time the efficacy of the prescription showed itself, the pieces grew together and the incoherent mass began to take the shape of a human being. Then the curiosity of Maimonides suddenly changed into perplexity, for a fearful idea of which he had not thought before struck him with awe and terror. If this man should now be immortal, what would become of human faith? Was he not now bringing a great and incalculable calamity into the world? These and similar ideas haunted him day and night, and the time drew near and nearer when his pupil would again be alive. An oath bound him not to touch the vessel or to destroy it and yet no other alternative seemed open to him than to destroy it. Weighing all the consequences he finally decided in favour of his pupil's annihilation, but not through his own hand. He therefore put in a cock in the room where the glass bell stood, and the cock flying about threw it down. In the same minute the Rambam threw his book of medicine into the fire, so that it should not again tempt anyone. He himself afterwards led a life of penitence and repentance for the death which he had caused.

So far the legend, which, curious as it seems to be, is not without analogies in the outer literature. The same feat of extraordinary knowledge and power is attributed also to Virgil, who was considered as a magician and great sorcerer during the middle-ages. In this form it is Virgil himself who gives the order to his famulus how to carry out his precept. The king, Augustus, seeing that Virgil does not appear for some time at the court, suspects the famulus of murdering his master, and visits the house of Virgil. Thereby the process is disturbed, and the poet is never more resuscitated. Of Paracelsus, the founder of modern medicine, a similar legend was current in the middle-ages and so forth.

Although identical in the essential part, nevertheless the non-Jewish legends differ from the Jewish legend in a very important and characteristic feature. The accomplishment of Virgil's and Paracelsus's immortality is disturbed by accident and in that way their vain desire is annihilated. Whereas in the Jewish form, Maimonides is frightened at the idea of endangering human faith, and deliberately puts an end to such an undertaking, whose consequences may become disastrous to mankind. The ideal of religion guides his hand and he pays for this experiment with a life of repentance.

Of quite another character is the second tale. "The enemies of Maimonides at the court of the Sultan left nothing untried to destroy him. After several unsuccessful attempts, they calumniated Maimonides by saying that he could not approach the Sultan without covering his mouth, as he had said that he could not bear his breath. Previously they had induced Maimonides to believe that it was so also with the Sultan. When the Sultan afterwards found the accusation, as it seemed to be, true, because Maimonides appeared next time with his mouth covered, he ordered Maimonides to go to the lime-kiln and ask if his order has been fulfilled. To the men employed there the Sultan sent an order to throw into the fire the first who came with such a message. Maimonides, not suspecting anything, went to obey the command of his master. But a widow, whose child was lying in fever, stopped him on the way, and induced the great doctor to enter her hut and cure her only child. After performing this duty he pursued his way, and came later than he expected to the furnace. When he asked there, if the order of the Sultan had been fulfilled, the servants answered, laughing and pointing to the furnace, "oh, the order is kept, and *he* is safe." Maimonides then returned, wondering as much at the message as at the puzzling answer.

When the Sultan saw him the next morning he could not believe his eyes. But while he questioned him about his errand, a man brought the seal of the man who had been thrown into the furnace at the order of the Sultan. The bitterest foe of

Maimonides had not waited till the next day, but he went himself to inquire at the furnace, whilst Maimonides was detained by the widow. Being the first to deliver the message, he underwent the fate destined for Maimonides.

With a slight variation as to the cause of the hindrance, the same story occurs in many forms in the world's literature. It is one of the best known miracles of the Holy virgin, and is the subject of Schiller's ballad, "*Gang nach dem Eisenhammer.*" The moral of the Jewish version is that because he saved a life, his life was also saved. Whilst the other version dwells upon the performance of rite!

Passing over an entire cycle of legends and tales of Maimonides, the next figure which catches our eye is that of the famous Rashi, who covered with an agadic veil the clarity of the Bible, and who enlightened the darkness of the Talmud by his unsurpassed commentary. We must refrain from mentioning even the numerous legends in which he is the hero, such as his visit to Maimonides the search of his neighbour for heavenly bliss, and others of a similar nature.

Like Maimonides his future reputation was announced by a voice from heaven long before he was born. His father Iitzhak lived, according to the legend, in Toulon. Once upon a time, as he was walking along the seashore, he found a wonderful pearl. A short time afterwards a jeweller came to buy it, but found only his wife at home. He offered her a large sum of money, and said that it was required for a monstrosity ordered by the Duke for the church. When she heard of the use to be made of it she refrained from selling it, and referred the jeweller to her husband, who might decide as he liked. When he came home they both decided to throw the pearl into the sea which they did. In the same moment a heavenly voice was heard, saying: "Iitzhak, when the season comes round, lo thy wife shall have a son, who will expound the Law to my people." In order to avoid the wrath of the Duke they escaped from Toulon, and took up their abode in Worms. And the legend goes on to tell of the birth, growth, and death of Rashi. We pass over it, and stop only at the episode of Rashi's encounter with Godfrey of Bouillon, the chief leader of the Crusades.

Attracted by the fame of Rashi's knowledge Godfrey went to see him, to ask about the result of their enterprise. On his arrival he found all the rooms of Rashi's house open, and when he asked for Rashi, Rashi answered him, although invisible. At his request Rashi became visible, and Godfrey asked him as he was a prophet and a wise man, what would be the issue of this adventure? And Rashi answered shortly: "My lord! I will tell you the truth. At the beginning you will be fortunate, and you will occupy Jerusalem, and reign therein for three days. But on the fourth day you will be driven out by the Ishmaelites, and you will lose everything. All your people will die, and you will enter this city only with three men and a horse's head." The Duke was much frightened at these words, and said: "It may be that your prophecy will be realised. But know, that if I re-enter this town with one man more I will give thy flesh to the dogs, and all the Jews shall die." So he went away. Everything happened as it was foretold by Rashi. The Duke was now returning home: when he came near to Worms he remembered the prophecy of Rashi, and behold, he had three companions with him instead of two, as Rashi had told him. He made up his mind to punish him and all the Jews, as he had threatened. But the Lord, blessed be His name, annihilates the thoughts of the wicked, for, as the Duke, with the first two men entered the gate, a portcullis, covered with spikes, which is generally used to shut the gate at the approach of enemies, fell down unexpectedly, and knocked off the head of the fourth horse, leaving his rider outside the city. So the prophecy of Rashi was fulfilled to the letter. The Duke, humiliated at this sight, went to the house of Rashi to bow before him, but he found him lying on his bier. He put on mourning; for, as the story adds, it was only right to mourn for such a man as Rashi.



In this legend the whole crusade is turned to a glorification of Rashi, and to prove the nothingness of all that great movement. The fate to which Godfrey is doomed is predicted by a Rabbi, by a hated Jew, and the leader of kings and armies, the flower of chivalry and Christendom returns home with two companions and a horse's head!

We now pass to Jehuda Halevi, the famous poet of the songs of Zion, who died at the hands of an Arab while enraptured at the ruins of Jerusalem. The legend makes him father-in-law of Abraham Ibn Ezra, the genial and critical commentator of the Bible, the great traveller, who visited England and India. R. Jehuda Halevi, according to the legend, absorbed by his studies with his friend the King Kuzar, whom he converted to Judaism, had totally forgotten to marry his daughter. His wife argued therefore once with him and said: We are now old, and we have only one daughter, and she is still unmarried. R. Jehudah became angry and took an oath that she should marry the first man who would come the next day. The next morning the first person he met was a ragged young man. He took him in his house and betrothed him to his daughter. The wife of R. Jehudah felt very unhappy, and she asked her son-in-law if he knew anything. But R. Jehudah said: I will teach him, and I hope that he will become a scholar. But very soon he saw that all his teaching was useless, for the young man seemed to be utterly ignorant.

Once upon a time they were waiting for R. Jehudah for supper, but he did not come; they waited for him till late; and as he still did not appear, his wife went to his schoolroom and asked him to come. He refused because he had been the whole day engaged in composing a Purim hymn with an alphabetical acrostic, and he had stopped at the letter *R*. For hours he was now trying to find a corresponding word beginning with *R*, but in vain. Pressed by his wife, he left the manuscript there and went home. The young man, curious to know the cause of the delay, asked his mother-in-law why R. Jehudah came so late. And she answered, "What does it matter to you? you ignorant man! you at any rate cannot help him!" But he insisted, and she told him the anger of R. Jehudah. He then asked her again to fetch the manuscript. At his request she only reluctantly gave way and brought him the manuscript. He took it into his room and the Lord—blessed be He—gave him the right mind, and he found the fitting word for the commencement. So he wrote the whole verse. The next morning when R. Jehudah saw it he was very astonished, and asked his pupils if anyone among them had looked into his papers and added that verse. But they all declared that they knew nothing about it: they only knew that his wife had fetched them last evening, and the pupils thought that he had sent for them. R. Jehudah sent for his wife, and she told him all about the young man, how he pressed her to bring the manuscript, and that no other than he could be the author of the verse. Entreated by R. Jehudah, he discovered himself to be R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, already famous. And the legend goes on to say that after the wedding, they studied together and diffused learning throughout Israel. This was the custom in the Ghetto learning and knowledge, even clothed in rags, was the only object worthy of acknowledgment, and it was considered as a natural thing to devote it *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.

Not so fortunate, but no less poetical is the life of the other king of Jewish poetry: Ibn Gabirol, author of the *Kether-Malchuth*. He lived in Valencia. A Moor envying his glory as poet, induced him to enter his garden, and unseen by anybody killed him and dug his grave at the root of a fig tree. But where no eye of a human being is present that of the Lord is watching, and the tree disclosed the crime, for soon after the murder the tree began to blossom and produced marvellous fruits, which were not at all in season. The sweet song

of the poet had passed into the fruit. The rumour of this extraordinary fact spread quickly through the town, and reached the ear of the King. He asked for the cause of this early blooming. The Moor was convicted of the murder and hanged upon the same tree, whose roots had sucked the blood of the great poet.

An analogous legend is further told by the dwellers in the Gheto of another extraordinary indictment of the murderer of a poor Jew. No crime can be hidden, and every wicked deed finds its reward, so also in the following tale: Once upon a time a Jew wandered through a field, when suddenly he was attacked by a robber, who plundered him and took away everything that he possessed. Not satisfied with this and fearing to be denounced by the Jew, he resolved to kill him. The Jew entreated him to spare his life, and promised not to mention a word; but if he would not have pity on him the bird which was on the tree would denounce the murderer as it is said: "For a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter."—[cccl. x, 20. The robber did not listen to him, and killed the man on the spot. From there he went to an inn to eat and drink. The host brought in a dish of birds. When he saw the birds he began to laugh, the host who stood at the table seeing the man laugh, asked him the reason of his laughter. The murderer thought: it's only a Jew, and therefore it does not matter; so he told him his adventure with the Jew who had taken the bird as a witness. Now he remembered those words and therefore he laughed. But the landlord did not take it so easily, and he thought if he has killed a Jew, perhaps he has also killed other people; and he denounced him to the magistrate. The murderer was taken up and after a trial, sentenced to death. So the words of the dying Jew came true, and the words of Holy Writ were proved infallible. This story known also in ancient times as the legend of Ibycus has been preserved till to-day in the same form among German fairy-tales, as in Grimm's collection (No. 115).

I really do not know how much longer to continue telling you legends and tales, without tiring you and trespassing on the time and indulgence allowed to me. I must pass by with a mere mention of the miraculous travel of Nachmanides; the mastership of Rabbi Jehiel, the prototype for Maître Zéchié in "Notre Dame de Paris," of Victor Hugo; The Golem of Rabbi Löw, in Prague; the touching legend of a Mortara-case in the middle-ages, when a child was stolen from the Jews and became Pope of Rome, was recognized by his father who came to ask the help of the Pope, and gives up the highest position in the world to join the misery and wretchedness of his unhappy brethren, the self-sacrifice of Rabbi Meïr of Rothenburg, who preferred to die in prison rather than give to the Princes new means to extort money from the Jews by imprisoning their Rabbis. And so many, many similar tales. I will pass them all, and will only mention a parallel to the legend of *Tannhäuser*, or the legend of the blossoming rod.

There lived once a renegade, who bitterly persecuted the Jews, and caused many of them to die. This he did for years; but after a time he came to the pious R. Jehudah and said to him that he would repent his sins if there were any hope of his being forgiven. R. Jehudah was just carving a stick of cornel-tree, and he said to him, "Your sins are too great. As little as this stick can ever blossom again so little is the hope that you should be forgiven." As the man heard this not very encouraging answer, he went away and said, "Now I will be worse than ever." Not long afterwards R. Jehudah beheld his rod, and lo! it was green and blooming. Astonished at this miracle, he sent immediately for the renegade. When he came, R. Jehudah said, "Tell me what good deed have you done, so that it has outweighed all those fearful sins you confessed to have committed?" And the man said, "I remember I came once to a town where the Jews were accused of murdering a child for its blood. As the people knew of my coming, they said, 'We



will ask him, who has abjured his old faith, and he will tell us the truth as to the use of the blood, and we will act accordingly.' I then took an oath and told them that the accusation was groundless, and I brought many proofs for my assertion of their innocence. In consequence of my word, the Jews were released, and they did not suffer anything; whilst, if I had said the contrary, all the Jews would have been murdered. This is the single good work I remember." R. Jehudah gave him a penitance and as a *Baal Teshuba* he atoned for his sins and became a pious Jew. In Tannhäuser and other similar legends, no cause for the blossoming of the rod is indicated, and this is taken only as a symbol of the unlimited power of penitence. In our Jewish legend the good deed which produces the miracle and shows the penitence as a useful one, is that he rescued the Jews from the fearful accusation. This single act was sufficient in the middle ages to secure forgiveness.

These few examples show what poetical life reigned in the Ghetto, and prove beyond any doubt the steady exchange between the literary property of the Jews and that of other nations. I could here add the literature of the romances of chivalry, which penetrated through the Jewish-German dialect, to the utmost end of the Jewish diaspora. Such as *Bovo-Maase*, the English romance of Sir Bevis of Southampton; *King Artus-hof*, of the same origin; *Flore and Blancheflore*; the beautiful *Helène*, daughter of the King of Constantinople, and so forth. Jewish literature contains also a number of fairy tales which contributed to the charm and delight of the people. Perhaps, on another occasion I will deal with the entire literature and study and publish it, not merely as a lecture, but as an elaborate work.

Eternal is the charm exercised by the romantic literature in all times over all nations. How anxiously the child watches your lips when you tell him the wonderful feats, the miraculous deeds, the supernatural power and wit of the hero. It is an ideal world, where nothing is impossible, and where the keenest finds the reward for his courage and daring. Even the man, when he listens to these children of poetical fiction, feels himself sometimes transported back to that time which is all sunshine and light when he was a dweller in the low-land of rosy mist and shapeless castles, where the future shines before the eyes of youth like a vague, golden, glorious landscape, until material life blows away this house of cards.

What is now the real interest attached to the study of folk-lore? What is the meaning of these fabulous tales and legends? Nowadays anthropology is busy with the gathering of chips of stones and of long-forgotten and buried remnants, in order to reconstruct the history of human, physical and social development. Much more important than those remote periods and than the material world, is the history of our intellectual development, to gather all the chips of the human genius, scattered and buried under the ruins of old literatures, and hidden in the popular literature. The youth of the human mind and the poetical reflection of the surrounding world are embodied in these tales and legends. In vain you ask for the moral—the meaning thereof. They do not intend to *teach*, but to rejoice and to elevate. What is the moral meaning of the bird's song, or of the perfume of the flower? of harmony in nature? They do not teach us either any moral or ethical principle distinguishing between evil and good, between right and wrong; but they teach us the moral of æsthetics, to distinguish between the beautiful and ugly, between harmony and anarchy, between anguish and peace of mind: naturally each in its own way. Art and poetry are the multicolored rainbow, the sign of peace and quiet after storm and disaster which unites heaven with earth, and which is in popular fancy the bridge for the angels descending from on high. Thus also the genius of the people descends upon that rainbow, *art and poetry*, from higher regions down to the earth.

Besides this psychological and universal importance, the legends and tales have also a special national tendency. They are the everlasting monuments more durable than those of stone and brass, which the thankful nations erect to their heroes in their heart. They live for ever in the mind and the mouth of the people which is thus never forgetful of the past, and striving for the future. And these our legends tell us in behalf of our people and its heroes, that—

Pride and humiliation hand in hand

Walked with them through the world where'er they went

Trampled and beaten were they as the sand,

And yet unshaken as the continent.

For in the background figures, vague and vast,

Of patriarchs and of prophets rose sublime,

And all the great traditions of the past

They saw reflected in the coming time.—LONGFELLOW

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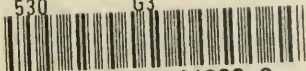
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